

Christ the King

November 23, 2008
Ezek. 34:11-16, 20-24; Eph. 1:15-23;
Matt. 25:31-46

Introduction. One of the buzz words from modern psychotherapy is “closure.” Whenever a life transition occurs—

whether it is dramatic, such as death or divorce;

or expected, such as graduating from high school or experiencing an empty nest—

in order to get on with life, it is necessary to accept what has happened, and to affirm the good in the past. In other words: we need closure.

Christ the King Sunday draws our attention to closures. It is the last Sunday of another church year, marking our transition once again to the Advent and Christmas seasons. And its theme is God’s final judgment of humanity, marking the transition from this world to the eternal realm.

The question that confronts us is:

Even though we **have** this glimpse of the final reality, how can we experience God as present and active **now**—in our world today...

when most of the time we are more aware of God’s absence than God’s presence;

when most of the time we are plagued more by ambiguity than we are comforted by certainty?

Or, to put it another way, as we work out the ministry of our daily life, living in the already but not yet of God’s future, how do we find closure?

1. In today’s second reading, the prophet Ezekiel faced a terrible situation. God’s people had been defeated and led into exile. God had charged the kings of Israel to be like shepherds to their people, leading, feeding, healing, and uniting them. But these kings had failed... miserably; and so, God **himself** promises to be the Shepherd-King.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezek 34:15-16)

In the gospel reading, **Jesus** is the Shepherd-King who finally **fulfills** God’s promise. When he comes again in glory as the King, Jesus will judge all people, separating them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

But to return to the question which I raised a minute ago:

What does this vision of the end of the age say to us who live in between the times?

What kind of “King” **is** Lord Jesus?

It's interesting to note that Jesus never refers to himself as "king." Quite to the contrary, John reports that Jesus discouraged people who wanted to make him a king. The only time Jesus is called "king" is during his trials, when he is accused by his enemies. And ironically, this title "king" remains on the sign that hangs over his head on the cross: "This is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

So..., our Shepherd-King is not a mighty ruler who strikes fear into the hearts of his enemies. King Jesus can't even raise his head or his arms—they're nailed to the cross. This King is not like a "king" at all—at least, not like any king we are used to.

This king, this Shepherd of Israel, seeks his sheep not by lording it over them, but by being among them.

This king, who will judge all people at the end of time, this king is bound to his people in their weakness and in their distress.

In fact, the **surprise** in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats is that Jesus is present precisely in the needy neighbor or stranger. **One** day Jesus will sit at God's right hand in the heavenly court; but in the mean time, he lives not in some distant place far above the world's pain and suffering.

Jesus is present:

in the one who is needy
naked
sick
or in prison.

2. The real point of this parable, then, is not so much the virtues of the sheep or the faults of the goats; rather, the point is the **hiddenness** of the King in the "least of these." **Neither** the sheep **nor** the goats recognize the King in the misery all around them.

What **separates** the sheep from the goats is that they remain faithful to Jesus' example and teaching. When they see their brother, their sister, their fellow human being in need... they remember Jesus' example and they respond.

"I was hungry and you gave me food."

Jesus twice took a small amount of food
and empowered his disciples to feed a multitude.

"I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink."

When Jesus instructed the disciples for their mission venture, he included this saying:

"and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me...

I was naked and you gave me clothing...

I was sick and you took care of me...

I was in prison and you visited me."

Jesus showed compassion and mercy to public sinners, to foreigners, and to outcasts of society.

Our task is not to **discern** Christ in our neighbor.

Our task is to believe that Christ is **already** there,

and that to be the people of his pasture, means to follow him into the heart of simple human need.

3. A pastor tells the story of how, during the waning years of the depression, he used to stop by Mr. Miller's roadside stand for farm-fresh produce. Food and money were still extremely scarce and bartering was used... extensively.

One particular day, he writes, I noticed a small boy, ragged but clean, hungrily eyeing a basket of freshly picked green peas. I paid for my potatoes, but I couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller and the ragged boy next to me.

"Hello Barry, how are you today?"

H'lo, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus' admirin' them peas ... sure look good."

"They are good, Barry. How's your Ma?"

"Fine. Gittin' stronger alla' time."

"Good. Anything I can help you with?"

"No, Sir. Jus' admirin' them peas."

"Would you like to take some home?"

"No, Sir. Got nuthin' to pay for 'em with."

"Well, what have you to trade me for some of those peas?"

"All I got's my prize marble here."

"Is that right? Let me see it."

"Here 'tis. She's a dandy."

"I can see that. Hmmm, only thing is... this one is blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home?"

"Not 'zackleybut, almost."

"Tell you what. You take this sack of peas home with you, and next trip this way let me look at that red marble."

"Sure will. Thanks, Mr. Miller."

Mrs. Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over; and with a smile she said to me: "There are two other boys like him in our town, all three are in very poor circumstances. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes or whatever. When they come back another time with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn't like red after all and he sends them home with bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one, perhaps." I left the stand, smiling to myself, impressed with this man, whom I never forgot.

Some years later I had the occasion to visit some old friends in that Idaho community; and while I was there, I learned that Mr. Miller had recently died. They were having his viewing that evening; and knowing my friends wanted to go, I agreed to accompany them.

We got in line to meet the relatives of the deceased Ahead of us in line were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore dark suits and white shirts ... very professional looking.

As they approached Mrs. Miller, each of them hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly with her, and moved on to the casket. One by one, each young man stopped briefly and placed his own warm hand over the cold pale hand in the casket.

When our turn came to meet Mrs. Miller, I told her who I was and mentioned that I'd never forgotten about the marbles. Eyes glistening she took my hand and led me to the casket. "Those three young men, who just left, were the boys I told you about. Now, at last, when Jim couldn't change his mind any more about color or size ... they came to pay their debt."

With loving gentleness she lifted the lifeless fingers of her deceased husband. Resting underneath... were three, shiny, red marbles.

As you leave and return to the ministry of your daily life, remember: in an important way, our neighbor turns out to be someone we **need**, because the presence of neighbors in need is an up-close and personal presence of Christ himself.

And only with Christ's help can we find the power to live a faith that is active in love, a faith that hopes for—rather than fears—that ultimate closure, the final day of judgment.